

O 120900Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY ANTANANARIVO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1772
INFO AMEMBASSY PARIS IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L ANTANANARIVO 000759

DEPT FOR AF/E AND AF/FO
DEPT FOR NEA IRAN DESK
PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/12/2018
TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CN](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: COMORAN PRESIDENT SAMBI'S IRAN TIES ARE UNPOPULAR

Classified By: Ambassador Niels Marquardt for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Union of the Comoros President Sambi faces criticism at home for his efforts to enhance ties with Iran, mostly because moderate Sunni Comoros is wary of Shi'ism. Iran has opened a "foundation" office in Moroni to fund schools and an Iranian Red Crescent clinic. Most Comorans and in particular Muslim elders are skeptical of Iran's generosity and unhappy with the direction President Sambi is leading them in this regard. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Since his election in 2006, Comoran President Sambi has actively sought closer ties with Iran (where he studied to become a Muslim cleric in the 1980s). In conversations with EmbOffs, Sambi always emphasizes that "poor Comoros will accept help from all friends, but never with strings attached." At present, Iran has opened a "foundation" office in Comoros' capital, Moroni, that is funding new school projects. There is also an Iranian Red Crescent clinic in Moroni, though it appears to get few visitors. Most embarrassing for Sambi is a fishing boat donated by Iran years ago that sits unused; he reportedly wants to get rid of this "unuseful gift."

13. (C) Following the end of Bacar's regime and the restoration of Union authority in Anjouan (Sambi's home island) there were numerous reports that 200-300 Anjouanese had received scholarships to study in Iran -- in Grande Comore this is believed to be true and evidence of Iran's growing influence among Comoran youth. On a recent trip to Anjouan, Comoros Officer learned these scholarships had been promised but not yet led to many students departing for study. Comoran "representatives" of Iran, particularly in Anjouan, host frequent community banquets. These gestures of good will are welcomed by the population, but Comoran elders are concerned with the Shi'a message their Sunni Comoran people may be exposed to.

14. (C) Comoros is 99 percent Sunni Muslim and distinctly moderate. President Sambi (who studied both in Saudi Arabia and in Iran) is believed to be Shi'ite. When a working-level Iranian delegation recently visited Anjouan with Sambi, there was a controversy at prayer time. Local Imams walked out of the Mosque when their Iranian counterparts attempted to follow the Shi'a, rather than Sunni, prayer rituals. Many Comorans express concern to us that President Sambi is trying to convert the Comoros to Shi'ism and a more strident version of Islam.

15. (C) Another Iranian delegation set off alarm bells when they approached deputies at the National Assembly to ask what would have to happen for President Sambi to extend his mandate (the President's one and only term is set to end in May, 2010). Word quickly spread that Sambi's Iranian friends would try to use their influence to keep him in power, and "advance their interests." Given the National Assembly is dominated by opposition politicians critical of Sambi, the Iranian demarche went no where. At present, President Sambi has announced his intention to hold a constitutional referendum in 2009; most Comorans fear he will use it to extend his current mandate. None of the traditional international partners -- African Union, United Nations, Arab

League, France, South Africa, United States -- is very happy about the referendum idea and not willing to fund it. Some GOC contacts suggested Iran may pay for the referendum.

16. (C) Respected Comoran leaders from the Grand Mufti (a government-appointed position to safeguard Islamic values) to former President Azali have expressed concern to us about increased fundamentalist messages being delivered in the Comoros. Many Comorans, failing to get scholarships to study in the west, have attended university in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan (to name a few). Some of these men returned to the Comoros, established themselves as Imams, and tried to grow a following. The Grand Mufti and other Muslim leaders believe most Comorans will quickly reject radical or Shi'a teachings; but they still worry about the small minority, lacking hope and opportunity, who may be attracted to these messages.

17. (C) COMMENT: President Sambi's relationship with Iran (where he traveled for the first time as President in July, 2008) appears to cause at least as many problems as it solves. Iranian humanitarian and development work has been big on promises and somewhat small on impact; so far. Disappointment over Iran's development assistance only exacerbates concern among Comorans that their President is friendly with such a regime. That their President welcomes a Shi'a presence into their Sunni midst is very troubling to Comorans and confusing given the country seems to obtain very little assistance in the bargain. END COMMENT.

MARQUARDT